Soldiers compete in heat for annual honors

by Sgt. Justin Diez
MDW News Service

Fort Pickett, Va., hosted this year's Soldier and NCO of the Year competition and its 11 participants for the National Capital Region this month.

In the end, Sgt. Karen Antonyan with the Military District of Washington Engineer Company and Pfc. Philip Fox with 524th Military Intelligence Battalion in Yongsan, Korea, emerged the victors.

Representing MDW on the junior-enlisted side was Pfc. Elizabeth Bittle, a military police officer stationed at Fort Belvoir with the 212nd MP Detachment.

"Well, it feels good," said Antonyan, who won the event last year as a junior-enlisted Soldier. "I've already won this before, but this was at a higher level [NCO] and now it's time to try and win the Army board; that's what it's all about."

One would think being at the event last year would give Antonyan an advantage over the field, but not in this case. "As an NCO it was even harder this time because as an NCO, you're going against other NCOs who have been in the Army for a while and have a lot of experience," said Antonyan. "So for me, it was really stressful."

"This is the biggest sense of relief for me all week," said Fox. "Everybody was right on the line, pretty much parallel and so every little detail matters, because it was so close."

The intense heat, humidity and unpredictable weather put the Soldiers through their paces for the rigorous, three-day event, Aug. 6-8, that determines who will represent the National Capital Region at the Army-wide competition in September. Other NCR-based commands with entrants in the event included Information Support Command and the Installation Management Activity. Fox competed under the INSCOM banner.

The event started bright and early at 5 a.m. Saturday with an Army Physical Fitness Test, and then moved to day land navigation. Using a compass, protractor and map, the participants had to plot and find a given number of points throughout the thick forests of Fort Pickett.

As the last Soldier ran in and reported his points, intense storms moved in and forced the Soldiers to do what they do best -- adapt on the fly. Instead of proceeding to the M16 qualification range in the midst

of a lightning storm, the troops proceeded to an indoor area to perform various tasks, including disassembly and reassembly with their rifles. When inclement weather struck, Sgt. Maj. Brenda McCall, the special projects NCO for MDW, was there ready and waiting with a backup plan.

"What we normally do for an event like this is have three courses of action just in case of inclement weather," said McCall. "This happened last week with the MDW competition where we had to switch events around."

When the sun set, the participants moved out to what is arguably the toughest part of the event; the night land navigation course. Moving through the forest in the dead of night, they searched for their points in zero visibility conditions.

Sunday proved no easier for the competitors as they again battled the intense heat and humidity while firing their M240 machine guns, qualifying with the M16 before starting this year's mystery event; employing a live Claymore mine. The competitors finished up the day's events with training lanes evaluating Common Task Training proficiencies, assessing whether the Soldier is able to meet the standard on such topics as evaluating a casualty to using a single ground channel airborne radio system.

The final day saw the Soldiers participate in the oral board where the Soldiers are inspected and graded on their uniform appearance, and asked a number of questions regarding the Army, its history and customs. While this competition was intense and wore on the competitors, for the winners, there is little time to relax before the final stage in September.

"I'll be doing a lot of [physical training] and ruck marches," said Fox, smiling. "Especially after the stories I've heard about the Army-level competition."

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